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Well-being and absolute value: Holland and the mystery of goodness

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My main purpose in this paper is to talk about the idea of *absolute goodness*, to try to show how different that idea is from that of wellbeing, and to do this by discussing R F Holland, in whose work the idea is prominent. I shall focus particularly on his essay “Is Goodness a Mystery?”

My aim is to suggest that thinking about absolute goodness can transform our understanding of wellbeing, indeed of the phenomena of morality generally. Holland’s exploration of this notion, deeply influenced by his reading of Plato (and of Wittgenstein), suggests that absolute goodness, and not wellbeing, is *the* pivotal concept of moral philosophy. Although at first sight it might seem to be vacuous, and is certainly difficult to characterize positively, coming to some understanding of this idea, to the extent that that is possible, has the consequence of relocating wellbeing, utility, virtue, happiness and cognate concepts in their rightful and subordinate place.

Some thoughts about wellbeing, and some difficulties

There are different conceptions of what counts as a good life ranging from having experiences of immediate pleasure to objective list theories – starting with the purely subjective and tending by degrees towards objectivity. These theories of the good life are more or less reductive, but all ground their conception of goodness on what is good for humans, i.e. on some idea of human nature, apart perhaps from the objective list theories which don’t

ground their theories at all and simply say that certain things are objectively good but they don't know why.

Aristotle thought that to be happy we have to be good, because his idea of a good human being just is one who is good at being human – one who has the wisdom and knowledge to know what is best for beings like us. We're more complicated than plants and animals because we have the power of reason, but basically, favourable conditions and appropriate nurture will produce a good person (a good specimen of humanity) with the wisdom to find their way about in the world successfully. Fate could intervene, as it did for Priam¹, but other things equal, happiness was to be found in a harmony of the various qualities of character, itself in harmony with a world in which such qualities as courage, wisdom, temperance and fortitude would, fate permitting, ensure happiness.

Kant was not as confident as Aristotle about virtue. He thought that qualities like courage, temperance and so on could as well be put to ill use as to good and so could not be the essential characteristics of a good person nor guarantee a good life. For him, the good person is one who wills the good. Nevertheless, like Aristotle, he thought virtue should and would be rewarded with happiness, but not this side of the grave. In this world, good people might still be "overclouded by sorrows"². It needed God to guarantee the coincidence of virtue and happiness in a future life, because nature cannot. In this life, doing right does not guarantee living well.

Bernard Williams thought the Greek idea basically sound but he too was less optimistic than Aristotle about the achievability of virtue and the good life. Nowadays we don't see the world as an ordered whole but as an evolving conglomeration of conflicting forces of which humanity itself is just one temporary manifestation. There is no longer reason to believe in the possibility of the inner and outer harmony that Aristotle thought the ultimate human perfection³. No reason to believe, therefore, that a human being can by their own efforts, and fate permitting, control their own destiny. Hence moral luck.

There is a paradox in the very idea of wellbeing that parallels the idea of the tedium of immortality: the idea of life after death is meant to be consoling in the face of death and nonexistence. It is, can only be, thought of as an existence rather like life as we know it but without the bad bits – without death or suffering. Yet, as soon as people imagine

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, BkI, §9.

² *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ch.1, 398.

³ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp.52-3.

what it would be like to be immortal, it comes to seem utterly tedious – oblivion may seem preferable after all. The idea of wellbeing seems to contain within itself the same contradiction: it is supposedly the ideal way to be on this side of the grave, one which we spend our lives aspiring to, and we may think some have; one which many philosophers have regarded as the goal, and the result, of the moral life. Yet the prospect of being ‘happy all the time’ is a picture of life without challenge, without risk of losing one’s wellbeing, the very thing one strives for – so it seems a real question how much wellbeing we can stand without losing all sense of the point of existence.⁴ Striving for better is inseparable from awareness both of the impossibility of its attainment and, if *per impossibile* it were attained, of its vulnerability to chance and its inevitable loss in death.

It would be no answer to suggest that the paradox is resolved by thinking of wellbeing for humans as consisting in the striving for better – in the travelling and not the arriving, in the way we handle our essential human vulnerability, in doing one’s best. It would be no answer to those whose misfortunes are such as to make them and those around them wonder if their life is worth living to talk of nobility in adversity.

A slightly different difficulty with the idea of wellbeing is this: was it necessary for Scrooge, the Prodigal Son, to live badly before they came to understand the error of their ways and started to live well? It can’t be just that life is for learning how to live well and we all end up wiser and living better than we started, because we don’t – some people start off well, morally decent or at least better, and then go off the rails (The Godfather, Macbeth, Faust); some people die before they get back on track, and some people seem never to have known where the rails are. The idea that people are just differently endowed with the capacity for human excellence right from the start would not be a satisfactory answer. What is unsatisfactory is the gloss put on the meaning of experience by framing it in terms of its contribution to an assessment of a person’s quality of life, or of the quality of a person.

As Aristotle said, “one swallow doesn’t make a summer”, so how do we assess the lives of people, and this seems to include everyone, who don’t come up to the mark? Has it all been a waste of time, shrug, that’s life? Or should this give us reason to suspect that recourse to the notion of wellbeing provides an incomplete, unsatisfactory account of what can be meant by ‘goodness’? Taking wellbeing as the *summum bonum*, the height of goodness, the reward for living well, represents goodness as a matter of skill at living. Reflection on examples like Macbeth and countless others suggests that this approach misses the meaning

⁴ Bernard Williams takes this view in “The Makropulos Case” in *Problems of the Self*.

of good and evil by reducing them to attainment of or degrees of deviation from the ideal form of humanity, dependent on competence at the art of living. Being good is a matter of being fitted for a certain kind of life, and wickedness a manifestation of ill-fittedness, partly due to chance and partly within our control.

So wellbeing is problematic: it's not clear that being virtuous can guarantee that we will have it, not just because we die too soon to get perfect, but because, even if acting well guaranteed flourishing, basing the explanation of good and evil on what is good and bad for beings constituted as humans fails to accord them their proper significance.

Holland, the life-form argument and what it can't do

Holland rejected all arguments of the above sorts offered in support of goodness defined as virtue and wellbeing, calling them "the goal-seeking sort of argument".⁵ He thought their similarities more important than their differences, whether reductive or non-reductive.

The more reductive form of the "goal-seeking argument" says that a thing is good if it conduces to some purpose; an action is good if it conduces to some end that humans happen to have, and humans happen to have the end of happiness. A person is good if they are well fitted to or for that end – if they have the sorts of qualities that fate permitting will foster flourishing. They can of course cultivate those qualities – the idea is that we have capacities which can be realized to a lesser or greater extent and in better or worse ways, hence virtue and vice are the characteristics of better and poorer quality human beings. Less reductively, culture is not fully determined by nature, so it provides space for historically conditioned ways of life to create values which may differ amongst societies and change over time and which are not necessary to the human species as such. Even so, what is good is still determined relative to human needs, goals and projects, from the biologically given to the culturally shaped.

Peter Winch advanced on this when he argued for what Holland refers to as "a qualified absolutism"⁶. Aristotle famously said that there is such a thing as natural as well as conventional justice – not every rule of law or social norm can be attributed to local custom. Winch argued against those who hold that all virtue is conventional, and in principle changeable, claiming that there are some virtues, notably truthfulness, that are needed for any kind of

⁵ References to Holland are to his essay "Is Goodness a Mystery?" unless otherwise stated.

⁶ Peter Winch, "Nature and Convention" in *Ethics and Action*.

recognizably human interaction at all and would be counted a virtue in any society whatever. There are logical conditions on the very possibility of communication that presuppose a distinction between true and false and that create the possibilities, at the same time, of truthfulness and untruthfulness. The moral norm of truthfulness cannot arise conventionally after first establishing communication. To represent the facts as they are is not just to say something true according to the rules of language, and to the truth of which those to whom one speaks are indifferent, but to commit oneself to its truth, to commit oneself to one's hearers as speaking reliably, to imply that one can be relied on. So it is quite impossible to imagine, make sense of any description of, a society in which no value is attached to the telling of truth. Some virtues are constitutive of the very idea of a society.

Holland agrees this is an important point, but claims it does not get us to absolute value – hence his describing Winch's "absolutism" as "qualified". Holland allows that this sort of argument accounts for 90% of ethical phenomena, but says "absolute value is something different and remains unaccounted for." (p.106)

Absolute goodness, examples, but no explanations

So now we must try to understand the missing piece of the ethical picture, and its relation to the rest. At this point it might be worth remembering the title of Holland's essay: "Is goodness a mystery?" Holland distinguishes between mysteries that are in principle solvable, and those that are not. The sort that are solvable are those where we just happen to lack the relevant knowledge – either I don't know it, or it is not currently known because science or the appropriate sorts of investigation haven't got that far or the evidence has been destroyed, but there are some facts of the matter and our failure or inability to get to them is merely practical. Philosophical perplexity is not like that. With philosophical problems we have the relevant information, but the puzzlement is conceptual. Even here, though, Holland says, conceptual puzzles divide into those amenable to some sort of clarification, and others, and the nature of goodness seems to be one of these, which offer a "peculiar sort of resistance to explanation". Sometimes, an inability to explain something reveals that the phenomenon is not genuine – a mistake has been made in describing, or identifying it; falling into nonsense is an occupational hazard in philosophy. But the persistent inability to explain judgments of value in his view is not because the problem is really a manifestation of confusion, but because moral reality has a depth that may simply transcend our capacity

to render it tractable by explanation. (p.93).

Holland here refers to remarks of Wittgenstein's, from his conversations, and in his "Lecture on Ethics" to explain what he means about the difficulty of goodness. Wittgenstein famously makes a distinction between someone who plays tennis badly but doesn't want to play any better, and someone who behaves badly but doesn't want to behave any better. In the case of tennis, there is no imperative to do better; in the case of behaviour, there is. If we say a person has behaved well or badly in a moral sense, and someone else wants to know why we thought so, while often we can describe the behaviour in more detail and identify more specifically those features of it that struck us as good or bad (e.g. its selflessness, its graciousness, its duplicity or meanness), all we are doing is substituting more specific terms for general descriptions in terms of 'good' or 'bad', but not getting any nearer explaining the goodness or badness. If someone still does not understand what is good or bad about the behaviour, there is nothing more we can say – there is no spare moral vocabulary to which we can resort that has greater precision or explanatory power than what has already been said. We can see, and we rely on others seeing, the good or evil in what we are looking at, yet we cannot say what it is, or why it is so. All we have done is named it, pointed it out for attention.

Explanation is attempted, but none satisfies. It is difficult even to know what is required. Holland notes three important negative observations made by Plato about the nature of goodness: it does not depend on pleasure, since people often take pleasure in the wrong things; it has nothing to do with worldly success (*pace* Aristotle, we might say); and it is not conventional, i.e. does not consist in following norms or customs. To elaborate a little on those candidate explanations: when someone behaves especially admirably, while it is true that this pleases, the goodness is not explained by reference to anyone's pleasure, since we take pleasure in the good, rather than the good being whatever pleases. Plato made a distinction between true and false pleasures⁷, and said that the person who has knowledge of the good is above being tempted by the pleasures and pains that motivate us in ordinary life. The person who has knowledge of the good sees them for what they are, is not governed by them, and is not thereby misled into false semblances of virtue. Regarding the second point, success, and the esteem of others that comes with it, is no guarantee of and should not be mistaken for true goodness: people can aspire to power, wealth and fame for their own sakes and can achieve them by foul means, while the good may forgo all and be despised;

⁷ Holland does not give references, but one place in which Plato makes this distinction is in *Philebus*.

in any case they are not aiming for anything. Thirdly, goodness cannot be a mere matter of conforming to norms, or it would be easy to achieve, there would be nothing problematic about it and we would not still be trying to fathom it.

Those explanations of goodness that essentially extrapolate from the form taken by explanation of relative value (e.g. being a good tennis player, a good carpenter) and thus construe moral goodness on the model of function, relating goodness to role, purpose, aim and desire, fall in Holland's category of goal-seeking arguments. He observes that absolutely good deeds are as likely to obstruct as to further anyone's purposes. The good of them is not explained by what they achieve, they are not done for the purpose of achieving what results from them, and often it requires a contortion to describe them purposively at all.

In another paper⁸, Holland recounts a story from Herodotus about one Adrastus, a Phrygian who accidentally killed his brother and was sent into exile. He turns up in the palace of Croesus, a king, who formally absolves and purifies him. Later, on a hunting expedition with the son of Croesus, Adrastus accidentally kills the young man. This is a double blow to Croesus in that he has not only lost his son, but it has happened at the hand of someone in whom he placed trust and to whom he gave position and responsibility. Nevertheless, even though Adrastus begs to be put to death, and Croesus can lawfully do so, he spares him. The goodness of this act of clemency is not made clearer by explaining it in terms of any sort of purpose (e.g. that it served the king's interests to spare him, that it produced a better outcome overall). Purposes in any case must themselves be evaluated as worthy or not, and ultimate purposes can only be assessed from the standpoint of absolute value and not from some yet further purpose. Nor, Holland adds, is the goodness exemplified here best understood in terms of norms – Croesus broke the rules in sparing Adrastus, and would have surprised everyone by doing so; no-one would have thought the worse of him had he put Adrastus to death.

Peter Winch's argument is seen by Holland as an advance on the goal-seeking argument in that it shows that there are logical constraints on possible candidates for goodness. Not just anything can intelligibly be called a virtue, not just anything can count as good even though these things are not purely biologically given by the nature and needs of the human animal. Nevertheless, Holland contends that the life-form argument still seeks to explain our valuing certain things in terms of the human constitution and the conditions of social life,

⁸ Symposium: Moral Scepticism, RFHolland and JHarrison, PASS 41 1967 185ff.

including the complex of institutions and practices that generate standards of behaviour, adherence to which will count as behaving well and deviation from which will count as behaving badly. Though more insightful, arguments taking this form still relate goodness to human forms of life. They still make valuing something a matter of “favouring it . . . against a background of arrangements composed of a nexus of natural and institutional needs.”⁹ Holland allows that they can account for 90% of ethical phenomena: they can show how ethical concepts can first get started; indicate the situations in which evaluative language is taught and learned; help us to see why some choices and not others present themselves in a particular society and indeed they “account . . . for every kind of customary and mediocre goodness”. These arguments may appear to have exhausted the realm of the ethical, yet absolute goodness is not addressed and remains unaccounted for.

So what is this absolute goodness that is unaccounted for? Holland usually resorts to examples to illustrate what he means, since, while he claims that all the other sorts of explanation fail, he also makes quite clear he does not think he can offer a better one, precisely because of the intractable nature of the phenomenon. Here, returning to Winch’s life-form explanation of the virtue of truthfulness, Holland says that the sort of truthfulness that such an argument can defend falls short of the sort of truthfulness that displays absolute goodness. The sort of truthfulness that is necessitated by the facts of communication and mutual reliability is enough to support joint enterprise and maintain social organisation. But Holland thinks it is a quite different sort of truthfulness that inspires admiration. In a society that depends on the ordinary norms of truthfulness, there could be those who show a concern for truth that is on another plane; as Holland puts it, “in which *not to falsify* became a spiritual demeanour.” Would it be going too far to suggest it was such a concern that led, or misled, Kant into insisting that one could not even lie to protect the innocent? Having a concern for truth of this kind need not be taken to imply a universal rule that one must never lie; but only in light of it will the true significance of lying be seen.

I think it important to ponder thoughtfully the examples Holland gives, because the distinction he sees between mere virtue and absolute goodness is probably not immediately obvious, some people may think it doesn’t exist, and it is only by reflecting on examples that one can begin to see what he means – it is what he wants his reader to do. Most people understandably baulk at Kant’s refusal to lie to protect the innocent, and don’t find Kant’s arguments convincing. Against Kant, arguably it is neither possible nor necessary to decide

⁹ p.106.

in the abstract, for all time and all people, what to do in real life situations; but I would say that I sympathise with Kant's respect for truth, and I just want to suggest here that arguably, whatever we think of his moral theory, he saw and tried to avoid the shortcomings of life-form arguments and to capture just the sort of concern for truth that Holland is thinking of. I may be wrong about Kant; the point I want to make is that there are people who would die for the truth, indeed have done so (Thomas More, say), and valuing truth in this way cannot be explained in terms of forms of life; More valued truth over orthodoxy, and being true to himself over maintaining a position. The truth is an abstract sort of thing to prize so highly; some people may think it not worth dying for and that people who do that have thrown their lives away, 'for an idea' or 'an ideal'. At any rate, those people did not think so, and Holland does not think it absurd that someone should do that.

Holland asks, "Where could this spirit come from?" He draws on Wittgenstein's idea, from his lecture, of "what it is to wonder at the world", and sees a connection between this and concern for truth, seeing the beauty of the world, and the cherishing of things. What could he mean? What did Wittgenstein mean? The life-form argument does not take our attention to the sorts of thoughts – experiences, encounters – Holland gestures at here: a concern with wellbeing looks in the wrong place for this kind of goodness, or looks from the wrong place. Holland talks of "encounter" with absolute goodness; Wittgenstein talks of "seeing in a flash of light" that there can be no explanation of it; he also says that "a certain characteristic misuse runs through all ethical and religious language". One reason these intimations of deeper reality are ultimately a mystery is because they are not intelligible except from personal experience – what is met in an encounter can at best be named, not described. Wittgenstein said he would have to reject anything that was put forward as an explanation because it could not possibly be of the right kind; reject "on the ground of its significance", i.e. we don't have the words to explain because it is not expressible with the linguistic resources we have, arising from our experience as creatures in a material world and by metaphorical extension from that. It is encounter with something real, whose name is goodness, but whose nature is not described by naming it and can no more be described than the colour yellow. There is a linguistic point here too: that to understand, to mean, we use language in the midst of things, just as we learn it not by being given meanings of words using other words, but by relating words to world. Absolute goodness is something we encounter; you have to encounter the phenomenon to know what the term means.

This is where Holland's paper ends. That leaves me with a bit of a puzzle. He distin-

guishes two kinds of goodness, the mediocre sort and the other sort. The first sort is much easier to understand and explain, and accounts for most ethical phenomena; the latter sort defies explanation. So, if we recognize the reality of the second kind at all, and perhaps not everyone will, what does it mean for us, and can we say anything about the way the two kinds are related, or are they just isolated facts? I don't think Holland spells this out to us anywhere in his writing, but I suggest we return to Plato to shed light on this. Recalling Plato's simile of the Sun¹⁰, we remember that he said the Good is that in light of which we see all things as they really are, and without whose light we are liable to see things only in part, or in a shadowy way, and to mistake their real nature. So, judgments of what constitutes wellbeing, indeed all moral and ethical judgments, must be mediated by a conception of absolute good or they are liable to distortion. If so, we can only judge what counts as wellbeing, distinguish the genuine from the false claimant, in the light of the Good, even though there is no explanation of what that is. So a conception of the Good precedes any notion of the good *for* humankind and guides our judgment of instances of it.

Possibly one more point about Wittgenstein might help here: he also spoke of feeling "absolutely safe". What could absolute safety be, as opposed to ordinary safety? What has safety to do with absolute value, and what has absolute value to do with living a good life? Wittgenstein's "feeling absolutely safe" is an example of an "encounter" with absolute value. Here I think he was adverting to feeling that "whatever happens, nothing can harm me"; and perhaps by making explicit reference to "harm", which is conceptually connected with safety, we can get closer to understanding the connection with absolute goodness. Clearly anyone can be harmed, very easily. Yet here Wittgenstein talks of feeling that nothing could harm him. This is clearly not the sort of harm that we ordinarily mean – physical, tangible, damage to body or mind. He's talking about harm in an 'other-worldly' sense, a non-natural sense – he calls it a "supernatural" sense. He's saying, 'Life, World, Fate, do your worst, you can't touch me.' It might mean something like this, that one has understood that there is something more precious than life itself, something one cannot lose, that cannot be taken away: that one has seen the value of life itself in the light of the good. In this conception of absolute goodness we have a sense of the good of things which is altogether above and beyond the worldly notion of human wellbeing. "Absolute goodness" is unrelated to the conditions of a person's life, or the quality of life, as these are usually understood. Plato in the *Apology* tell us that Socrates said, "a good man cannot be harmed"

¹⁰ Republic, BkVI.

– and added “either in life or after death”. He said that just before his execution.

All this sounds rather strange and even verging on the religious; I don’t think it is an essentially religious idea, if that is taken to mean that only the religious can understand it, still less that it only has meaning within a nexus of religious beliefs and concepts. I have said that people need to see absolute goodness to know what it is – but the very last thing I want to suggest is that it is rarely encountered or visible only to those with special qualities or powers. It is just as true that people need to see yellow, or hear the sound of rain falling, or experience love, to know what they are, but these are perfectly familiar experiences and I would say that the same applies to absolute goodness. You have to be awake to it, it may need pointing out, and it may often be taken for granted, but it is there to be recognized.

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